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The
REDEMPTION
of
Marie Gordon
THE TRAGIC STORY OF
WRONGED WOMANHOOD
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But she was in his arms now, and he could not bring himself to loose her. He was in a dream.

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THE VISION, however, followed him, fascinated him. And it was such a bright vision—that soft hand of Marjorie's to lead him into a fairer life, as it had led him from sickness to health; that pure soul to cleanse his; that perfect faith for him to lean on; that unflinching honesty to restore his shattered trust!

He made up his mind to go away again.

"Why are you leaving so soon, Graham?" Marjorie asked wistfully.

He never could help telling her things that were in his mind. So he said gravely—

"To fight out something with myself."

She looked at him questioningly.

"A matter of right and wrong." Ericsen added.

"I can't help you?"

He shook his head. "You used to be my conscience," he said, "but I must settle this alone."

He looked at the question honestly on all sides. He could do this, because he was not in love with Marjorie. His capacity for passion seemed burned out.

All he wanted was, as he called it, a resting place —a home that would have its sanctities, stainless truth, pure affection.

The sort of happiness he would have looked the more attractive the more sternly he questioned whither he dared seek it. What would the woman gain—Marjorie, with her full warm nature?

Such an existence would be unbearable to her; she would demand more than the calm sunset of happiness, having never known the glow and the light of noonday.

Then he heard again the breaking voice—

"Try and live for us!"

After all, it was just the same as in old days, when he couldn't settle anything without knowing what Mar-

jorie thought. So he went back to the Fairfaxes.

"You've settled your question soon," said Marjorie, meeting him with happy eyes.

"I haven't settled it at all," he answered gravely; and, a day or two afterwards, when they were alone, he said abruptly—

"Marjorie, you are still my conscience — I can't decide—you must. I'm tired of my life—it's empty, unsatisfying. I have memories that torment me—undying memories.

"I want to build up a new life; a woman could help me—could give me a home and the measure of such happiness as is left to me.

"But I should want so much more than I could give—the gain would be all on my side——"

"If the woman loved you?" Marjorie said under her breath.

"It would be harder for her if she loved me. I have had my vivid life; hers would be to come, and yet would be daily dimmed. It is peace I want—I seem to have no care for anything else; she would want happiness. And that is not all."

"If you find the woman who could make you happier," said Marjorie, looking into his troubled face with a smile, "tell her the whole truth, and let her be the judge."

"I am telling it—I ask you to be the judge!"

She half started up as if she would escape him; the blood rushed to her face, the beating of her heart almost choked her.

Ericsen started in his turn, a little dazzled — till there came surging back and dulling his emotion, the recollection of their familiar tie, and that he was breaking it.

He took her hand—it trembled in his.

Marjorie—forgive me!" he said falteringly. "I am selfish after all."

She shook her head as if she had no voice to utter a word.

"It's the question as between you and me I've been trying to solve," Ericsen went on, "not some other woman. I have been thinking of my own gain."

"Could I make you happier?" she whispered so low he could scarcely hear.

"Marjorie, I dare not make myself the plea — it would be too unequal. You have given yourself up for me since we were children together. There have been times when I couldn't have got through without you. But you haven't that need of me."

She was a woman, and he not a lover—her lips were sealed. But unconsciously her fingers clung closer to his hand. Ericsen drew her to him gently.

"Besides, you do not know everything, dearest," he went on, "and you are to be the judge, not the advocate."

"Not your judge!" Marjorie whispered. She hid her face. Ericsen was silent for a minute.

"That would be my happiness," she said then, more firmly, half lifting her head.

"What would?"

"To make you happy."

"Marjorie, would to God I had been stronger!" he cried passionately. "You would break your heart as my wife! I ought to have been silent forever! But at least you shall see—at least you shall not be blind— you shall know what shame blackens my life!"

The last words were said through his teeth; he made a move as if to put the girl from him, but she laid both hands on his arm.

"Graham—don't!" she said breathlessly. "Let me

stay! I know—I understand——"

"What do you understand?" he said, almost roughly, but he drew her back to him, holding her more closely.

"I know you don't love me—I know you want me to help you, to make you happier—I know"—her voice began to give way—"I should be happier——"

"Happier! You! You haven't suffered because I suffer? I haven't undone your life as well as my own, have I?"

"How could I not suffer with you?" she said, her voice now scarcely audible. "You don't undo my life; you make it all bright when you come to me to help you and comfort you!"

Before she had finished the broken words his head was bent to hers, and he listened in a sort of maze.

"It wouldn't be harder for me," she whispered between pauses; "you said it would, that would be my life."

The incoherent words were clear to him; he lifted his head and drew a long breath.

His thoughts flashed back to another confession not made in this halting fashion.

He said, in a hushed voice:

"You love me!"

Then, in a measured way, like a man a little awed, he led her back to her chair, and put her in it, kneeling beside her.

But she lay in his arms now, and he could not bring himself to loose her. He was in a dream.

Love—from this pure, passionate soul! The love he had craved for long ago! Not merely the sweet, household affection, the development of childish love, that he had sought.

Then came the recoil, he taking a priceless gift and yielding so poor a return! And—his bitter story!

He roused himself by sheer force of will; his first movement was to press her face closer to his breast; his first words were uttered hurriedly.

"My little Marjorie! My own darling! I never can thank you. But you shall not sacrifice yourself; I mean, you shall know everything."

She drew herself away from him, but gently.

Ericsen felt that somehow this girl, without losing her womanly dignity, had him in her hands; that he was telling her his story because to do so was due to himself, not because it could or would make any difference in their relations.

This feeling made him speak with less than the control he strove for, against his will, against her silent resolve, he was trying to convince her.

"You may know more than I thought you must have guessed," he began. "That day I came to you—and all through my illness you scarcely left me, I must have made some betrayal."

He had been holding her hands, but he dropped them abruptly. "I found the murderer," he said, with white lips—"my wife!"

Marjorie leaned forward, and folded his hands in hers.

The action, the way it was done, the tenderness, the strength, almost broke down his remnant of self-command. But he rallied, lifted his dark eyes with a look of speechless gratitude, and went on as if he were afraid to let himself pause a second.

It was an outpouring he had believed he never could make. Perhaps he could not if his listener had not been utterly silent and had kept over him the magic power of her touch.

All the horror, the anguish of that time, rushed over him as if the merciful years had not partly subdued

it. But he struggled through.

Marjorie heard from his own lips the things she had only conjectured, that he had hidden even from her; the heartbreak of disappointment, the drifting apart, the differences, the bitter disputes over the child, the slow, inevitable piling up of moral evidence, then the awful awakening.

Not a sound or a movement showed what she suffered, or made it harder for him.

He made few self-accusations, but all through these ran the sense of his remorse for what was to him a headstrong folly and ingratitude.

And he said little of his feeling, softened by the lapse of time, of personal degradation. He passed quickly over those solitary days and nights of agony after Reeves had spoken to him.

"I can't think of them even now," he said. But some of the bitterness came out at the end.

"So you see to what I want to link you," he said, "a man clogged by memories of a vile love, by an unspeakable shame! I haven't come out of it unstained; what man could? I should have suffered utter shipwreck but for you—when—Lilian had left me.

"Oh, Marjorie, Marjorie! He swept his hand over his eyes to force back his burning tears. "How can I be fit for any woman—my name hopelessly tarnished, I not even holding my own secret; others hold it, too, or may.

"I have no faith left, no power to give love. You must let me go, Marjorie; your life is fresh and clear. I should only darken it. You see what I am; I ought never have dreamed of release. Other men may have these things—honor, sweetness, home—I can't!"

She made no answer.

He had need of the pause to choke back the sob in his throat, to make his voice clear; then he looked up half

impatiently.

"Marjorie!" he exclaimed.

"But I knew a great deal of this," she said; "I could not help guessing—I never trusted her, you see. It was because I knew, that I would not let them lay her with Lilian."

"I know—I have thanked you a thousand times for that. And I haven't loved you less. It is the same. I came and went, and you were not tied. You shared my griefs in a different way."

"Why do you have those morbid fits, Graham? They are sheer fancies."

"Some of them."

"You were not five-and-twenty when you met Alice. And she did not really show herself to you. Your uncle had lived three times your years; at your age he would not have seen her so truly.

"You did all a lover ought to do—you waited. I should have thought less of you if you had given her up."

There was a quiver of emotion in the sweet voice here, but before Graham could do more than give a quick upward look, the girl had conquered herself.

"Afterwards," she went on, "when you understood what you had done, you blamed yourself, not her. She knew no change of kindness, of thought, of tenderness. Even then Lilian would have drawn you together if Alice would have suffered it.

"You wouldn't call yourself accursed, an outcast, if you had even ben able to talk to me as you have talked to me today.

"You have shut yourself up, you have tried to suffer alone, you have borne all the weight of a sin not your own; why should you bear it to your life's end?"

Again the quiver came into her voice, again she

started up, but this time because movement was a necessity.

She did not shrink from Graham; she turned to him as he stood with bent head and his hand gripping the beak of the chair.

"Children together we were," she said, the tears in her voice sounded strangely through the ring of passion—"and if it were only for the sake of that dear old tie, of that unforgotten time, I would give up my life gladly to make yours happier.

"I can't wipe out the past—God Himself cannot do that! But I can give you, I will give you, what other men have." The tears conquered, she caught her breath, and half blinded, she felt herself held and supported.

She could not stay herself then; the hardly maintained calmness she had shown throughout was swept down.

The pain of years seemed to have gathered up and forced the outlet so sternly denied it.

And if Graham did not fully understand this, he did partially; he knew that his little playmate and confidante, around whom gathered all the sweet, indelible memories of childhood, had been stabbed with the sword that stabbed him.

"You shall not shed such tears for me again," Ericsen said; "I will give myself into your hand—they always led me straight. I will see with your eyes, I will believe as you bid me; you shall sweep away the shadows. I cannot be wrong if you say I am right. And I—what am I to do for you?"

"Nothing — nothing!" she answered, hiding her face again on his breast. "I am to live for you!" And in her heart she added, "that is enough!"

Yes, it was more than enough. This man, whom she had loved so dearly since her girlhood days was to be

her very own at last. She was to be his wife—all his.

In that strange silence which had fallen, she accepted his kisses and returned them, too. He was like a little boy, begging to be taken into loving arms.

"Mine forever!" her happy soul cried out. "No human power shall ever separate us again!"

Chapter 331

HER MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

RAHAM ERICSEN and Marjorie Fairfax were married as everybody thought they should. Quite a large number of Ericsen's friends had never given him much credit for making a stranger like Alice Mortimer his wife. They had never quite trusted this beautiful siren. And so when she died, a victim of an overdose of self-administered chloral, no tears were shed.

Marjorie proved to be the kind of a companion Graham needed. She loved him dearly and she did her utmost to make him happy.

After a honeymoon they decided to settle in London for the coming social season. And here, in a fine town house, they made their plans for the future. They were both a little disappointed because Marjorie's mother refused to live with them.

"I think I'll be happier just where I am," she had told the young couple. "The country suits me very well. And," she had added with a knowing smile, "you two will be happier without me."

Ericsen and his lovely bride were happy indeed. Marjorie displayed an amazing degree of nerve upon several occasions. She had grit and self-reliance.

Graham had for some time thought of buying an automobile for Marjorie. When he broached the subject to her, she seemed delighted. With a cry of rapture she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Oh, you dear," she murmured. "How did you guess it? A car of my very own is the very thing I have

always wanted."

He smiled indulgently.

"But you'l have to be very careful," he warned. "You must not drive too fast. If you do, the traffic officers will get you here in London. They are very strict. And you might get hurt. If you lose your nerve at a critical mement——"

"Don't you worry about that, Graham," she interrupted him. "I'll take care of myself at any stage of the game. You can bet on that."

He nodded his head repeatedly.

"I believe you are thoroughly capable of doing that, my dear," he told her. "You are your mother's daughter."

She gave him a quick glance.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Ah, nothing." Ericsen flushed uncomfortably. "Only I always admired your mother's pluck after she was left a widow and had to shift for herself. You see," he added, smiling again, "she had a growing daughter to take care of. And some daughters are not so easy to handle."

"Look here!" Marjorie flashed up. "Do you mean to insinuate that I——"

"No insinuation meant whatsoever," he placated her easily. "You are the dearest girl this side of Heaven. I hope I'll be able to make you as happy as you deserve to be."

He placed a hand playfuly upon her mouth to prevent her from speaking.

They dressed a few minutes later and went out to look over some of the latest models and various makes of automobiles. Within an hour they brought one which suited them both.

Graham Ericsen made out a check and proceeded

to drive the car home.

On the way he gave Marjorie her first driving lesson. This he continued to do for several days. She picked up all the needed knowledge a great deal quicker than she expected.

And then came the eventful day when she took the car out by herself.

Her husband had gone to the club where he expected to take luncheon with some friends. This was her chance. With her heart beating fast she jumped into the car and started the motor.

Down the street she rushed as if she had to make a hurry call. But she was rushing headlong into fate.

She knew she should have stopped when she heard the police whistle. But she was well past the blockading sign before the traffic officer caught sight of her, and she could claim, of course, that she had no certain knowledge his summons was meant for her.

She resented, in fact, the peremptory and overshrill nature of that challenge.

It reminded her that the road was not so much her own as she imagined, that her movements could never be as free as she wanted them to be.

So she resisted the initial impulse to increase the speed of her car.

She merely moved on, but she moved on with the moderation of the innocent-minded, merely watching, in the oblong mirror above her windshield, the indignant though diminishing figure beneath the violated signal.

Her spirits lightened again when a slight curve in the highway finally carried her beyond his vision.

She quickened her pace then, once more proud of the power that lay beneath her pointed slipper toe.

She even resented the approach of a noisier car as she hummed on between the autumnal hills—a noisier

car that drowned out the efficient faint purr of her engine, so like the purr of a contented kitten.

She had no intention of racing. But when the insolently noisy touring car, with the insolent fat man at its wheel, forged slowly abreast of her she pressed determinedly down on the accelerator.

The thought of taking second place was never palatable to her.

She wanted to be victorious that morning, just as she wanted to be alone—alone with this shimmering new toy that was so responsive to her will and so unprotesting in its service.

It was not so easy as she imagined, however, to shake off the uncouth rival hanging on her flank.

So the pointed toe went lower and the kitten's purr sharpened into a muffled whine and the tapestried hills on either side of her flowed past in long lines of blurred color.

She swerved on, with a sense of soaring as she mounted a hill and a sense of falling as her tires took the downward slope beyond the crest.

She thrilled a little at that assurance of speed and exulted at the eventual discovery that she had outridden her rival.

But she saw the need of slowing down again, now that she had tasted her wine of victory, for at the crossroads ahead she caught sight of a winking light of warning.

She saw that light clearly enough as she dropped back to forty-five miles an hour, but she did not see the state trooper standing beside his motorcycle where the shadowing colonnade of elms parelleled the pavement.

She preceived the arm of the brown-clad figure go up, indeed, before she realized it was an officer of the law and that he was signaling her to stop.

She had intended to stop, even before she heard the mandatory whistle once more behind her.

But her speedometer still showed a speed of more than forty and it would take a good hundred yards, she estimated, to effect that stop.

And that alone, she knew, would be evidence of her transgression and, would, of course, lead to an argument.

An argument would spoil the persistent sense of high adventure that had been hers since she wandered forth that morning to taste this sparkling new cordial of power. So she made it neck or nothing.

She capitalized her offense by increasing her speed. She defied law and order by drunkenly stepping on the gas.

She bent lower over the wheel and went cannonading down the inviting long valley slope, grateful for an empty road and an engine that had been recommended to her as the fastest built.

It had vindicated itself, evidently, for when she sank back to a more reasonable speed she saw no russet-faced pursuer on her heels and no promise of trouble ahead.

But it would be as well, she remembered, not to lurk in the neighborhood of that indignant state trooper.

And it would be equally expedient, she felt, to abjure the main highway for the less sedulously patrolled side roads, where the scenery was more pictorial and her impression of being alone could be more pronounced.

She even wrung a wayward sense of triumph out of worsting an enemy who was always troublesome and often seemed disrespectful.

And it was very lovely, she saw, in this wilder and more heavily wooded hinterland, where the oak copses were dull flame and the marsh grass was the color of a

lion's mane.

She was happy with a two-fold sense of escape. She even hummed to herself as she idled down to study the Roman gold and russet of the scrub oak, half surrounding a bog land of warm umber frilled with the thinning red of swamp elder.

And still again she was glad that she was alone.

She could never have felt that way, she knew, if her husband had been along with her, if the ever careful Graham had been there at her side to criticize her driving and tell her not to overheat her new motor.

But she was her own mistress that morning, she proclaimed, as she half willfully made the maroon-colored coupe lunge forward and slow down again, responsive to the slightest movement of her narrow-toed slipper.

It was as she drifted slowly and contentedly along the clor-splashed lowlands that she first saw the man—the man who so abruptly reminded her that she was still much less alone than she had imagined.

He had, apparently, been eating an apple, which he tossed away as he emerged from between the scarlet topped sumac bushes.

She expected, when he signaled so authoritatively for her to stop, to see him in uniform.

But when she directed her attention toward his apparel she preceived that he wore an ill-fitting suit of tweed, a suit so obviously too big for him that it tended to make him ridiculous.

When her glance rose to his face, however, her earlier impulse to laugh at him promptly vanished. For about that intent face was something vaguely disturbing, something unmistakably determined and sinister.

"Stop!" he commanded, with his arm still up as the car bore slowly down on him.

But she had no intention of stopping on that lonely road beside a figure so unsavory. The man, in fact, looked little better than a tramp.

But there was a tensity about him, she saw, as she glanced down at the alert face with the line of determination in the thin-lipped mouth, that marked him off from the wandering idler.

So, with her gaze still directed toward the interloper beside her running board, she quietly pressed down on her accelerator.

The car, in response to that movement, gained speed and swept past the man. She could see his face darken at the same time that he repeated his hoarse shout to stop.

But she did not stop.

She did not stop until a sound like a sharp bark assailed her ears and a bullet tore through the sheet aluminum of her car body.

Then, more in amazement than in terror, she suddenly lifted her foot from the accelerator and stared at the additional hole which the bullet, deflected, had torn in the car roof so close to her head.

An absurd wave of anger went through her as she realized the extent of that vandalism.

He had done violence to something beautiful and virginal and unsullied. He had practically ruined her new car.

Yet she switched off her engine when she found him running so determinedy along beside her, for the man, after all, must be a traffic officer in disguise.

Only an officer of the law, she felt, would have the effrontery to stop her in any such violent manner.

And he might have heard, in some way, of her earlier traffic misdemeanors that morning.

But her face was pale and indignation still burned

in her eyes as the man with the revolver flung open her car door.

"D'you hear me tell you to stop?" he demanded, with one foot on the running board.

His left hand, she noticed, clung to the nickeled door knob and in his right hand he still held the revolver.

"Why should I stop?" she countered, with all the spirit that she could command.

She was used to being treated with deference. She demanded respect and courtesy from those about her.

And she resented the autocratic way in which this bucolic individual was attempting to impose his will on her, was trying to interfere with her freedom and happiness.

"D'you want a bullet through your empty head?" he challenged as he crowded his malodorous body closer in through the narrow door.

"Why should I want a bullet through my head?" she asked, with a coerced calmness that showed the merest shadow of agitation.

But the man who had seated himself beside her, instead of giving his immediate attention to that inquiry, peered first backward and then forward along the empty road.

"Go ahead," he commanded, swinging the car door shut.

But she made no move to start the silent engine.

"Why should I go ahead?" she asked, fixing him with a quietly challenging eye that brought his quick nervous glance up to her face, now slightly flushed with anger.

She could see his mouth harden as he lifted his right arm and thrust the barrel end of his revolver against her side.

He smiled mirthlessly at her gasp of horror. One

crook of that none-too-clean finger, she knew, could send an ounce of lead tearing and rending through her body, just as it had already sent its ounce of lead tearing and rending through her burnished new car.

"If you want to live, lady, I'd advise you to move on," he said, with the careless audacity born of his unquestioned power over her.

She did want to live. That very morning, in fact, life had impressed her as a very beautiful and precious thing.

It could never be lightly forfeited. It was something to be clung to and fought for. She had every reason in the world for wanting to live. But she must live with dignity.

For deep down in her being, like waiting lions in their Colosseum cells, were kenneled feelings she could not always keep under control, feelings that could spring out and do violence to her clearer moments of thought, feelings of revolt against these too abject humiliations that could leave even the promise of security singularly trivial.

And she wondered how far he would go, this ludicrous interloper with the little iron cylinder that could spit death into her startled body.

"Who are you?" she found herself asking.

She was studying his face again, the oddly pallid face with the sunken cheeks and the bony temples and the animal-like alertness in the habitually narrowed eyes —and as she looked at that face she remembered.

The hand of memory, reaching out, turned a switch and flooded her darkness with sudden light.

She remembered hearing her husband as he talked with Sandy Forsaith about two lifers who had escaped from state prison the preceding Sunday.

They had sawed through the bars of a washroom

window, had hidden in an engine room until nightfall, and with a rope ladder made of braided bag hemp tied to a furnace shaker, they had, after grimly knocking two guards unconscious, scaled the wall and escaped.

Three days later, she recalled, one of them had been cornered and caught while trying to shave with a stolen razor beside a woodlot pond, though he had seriously wounded two of the farmers in the posse before his recapture.

But the other man had not been apprehended. And that other man, she had every reason to believe, now sat at her side with a loaded revolver in his hand.

A feeling oddly like physical nausea swept through her as a full realization of her predicament struck home.

But it lasted only a moment. It was followed by a feeling of betrayal and an ensuing sense of injustice at being so openly exposed to the unpredictable forces of evil.

Women, and especially women in her walk of life, weren't supposed to face such things. And all Graham's fussing, founded on affection though it were, had not prepared her for any such emergency.

It was about the car itself that he had fussed mostly; insisting that it should be insured that it should carry a fire extinguisher and a towing rope, that it should go about burdened with two heavy spares not only locked on the tire bracket but also linked together by a heavy steel chain of his own devising, a chain held in place by a big padlock that made her think of the Subtreasury. But none of that had guarded her.

A moment later, however, she remembered that if she stood without protection, without defenses, it was not so utterly and altogether her husband's fault as she might have wished.

She had ventured to act by herself that morning, to think for herself—and it was still a human prerogative to use one's own brain. That, in fact, was being imposed upon her.

And even now, she warned herself, everything would depend on her ability to remain calm and clear-headed.

This unclean intruder, she tried to solace herself by claiming, could be little better than an animal. And like all animals, he could eventualy be outwitted.

Yet when she looked at him again she was compelled to acknowledge there was something more than taurine ferocity in his hunger-lined face.

She could see cunning there, and craftness, and an uncouth recklessness born of desperation.

And she harvested the conviction, from his scowlingly estimative study of her face, that he in turn harbored no undue respect for her intelligence.

"Move on!" he commanded, with an impatient head nod toward the narrow road that lay before them.

But she remained stubbornly motionless.

"Are you an officer?" she demanded, and into that query she projected an air of meekness which she did not feel.

"Not by a long shot!" he retorted, with his curt bark of a laugh. "Why?"

"Because you must have some excuse for arresting me in this way," she explained, in the tenuous hope that he would still catch at that dissimulative cue, "and for doing what you did to this new car of mine."

"I'll do the same to you," he said, with a quick look back over his shoulder, "if you don't get it movin'."

She met the open menace of his gaze without flinching. Like every woman of undisputed appeal to men, she had long since plotted her curve of tolerance.

"I don't think you'd dare do that," she said, with a faint quaver in her voice.

But his face darkened at the unexpected note of quiet opposition in that speech of hers.

"You don't know what I'd dare," he said, with a quick hardening of his thin lips.

"But I intend to find out," she was on the point of proclaiming.

Instead of confronting him with that ultimatum, however, she let her glance lock with his narrowed glance as she remarked, "I'm not used to being bullied."

"Then here's where you begin," he said, as he settled back in the padded seat.

And her blood chilled a trifle at the contemptuous casualness of his tone. It was evidence, unpalatable evidence, of the extent to which he held her in his power.

"I'm waitin'," he said, with a movement of irritation at her immobility.

"I also am waiting," she asserted, with the quiet pertinacity of a woman to whom coercion was unknown.

"Waitin' for what?" he snapped, swinging about in his seat.

"For your reasons for this outrage," was her slightly tremulous reply. And his anger flashed up again at that unexpected show of opposition from her.

"Say, you bone-headed lollipop," he suddenly cried out at her, "I'm not paradin' my reasons for this ride. I'm the boss here, and if that isn't plain to you yet, I'll make it plainer."

"How?" she coolly inquired, wondering at the curdling of hate that eddied through her body.

He did not answer her in words. But with a movement of unexpected quickness he transferred his revolver from his right hand to his left.

She even thought for a moment that he was going

to threaten her once more with the barrel end against her ribs.

But instead of that he swung his empty right hand sharply upward and inward, striking her on the face with his open palm.

She did not cry out. But her sharp inhalation was almost a moan.

Her face went white, except for the momentary marks where the corrupting hand had smitten her cheeks.

And a strangled sob or two broke from her throat as she raised seemingly incredulous fingers and felt along the smooth skin with its island of scarlet.

"D'you want more?" he challenged, quite unmoved by the mental agony on the gardenia-white face.

"I understand," she said in little more than a whisper.

Yet she gasped again, inarticulately, as she made an effort to brush aside the tears that had gathered in the violet-blue eyes above the blow mark.

"Then start this bus," he curtly commanded.

She was still sobbing as she leaned toward the instrument board and switched on the ignition.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked in a voice which she struggled to keep from shaking.

"I'll tell you that when I'm ready," was his answer. "The thing to do now is to keep movin'."

She started forward without speaking, her eyes fixed on the roadway. Her teeth were shut on her indrawn underlip and her breathing was abnormally quick and shallow.

But she seemed to have regained some shadow of her earliest composure.

"Got anything to eat with you?" suddenly demanded the man at her side.

"No," she answered, as she continued to tool her car along the shallow-rutted road.

"Got any road maps?" was his next question.

"No," was her answer.

"Why haven't you?"

"This is the first time I've ever driven this car," she explained, slowing down as she spoke. "It's a new one."

"Until I punctured it," he curtly amended.

But he appeared piqued by her quietness of voice, puzzled, apparently, as to the source of some new fortitude he found in it.

His glance at her, however, was both brief and contemptuous.

He was more interested, a moment later, in studying the interior of the suede-upholstered coupe.

When his wandering eye caught sight of her pencil-blue leather book bag, which, along with her handkerchief, she had thrust into the seat pocket beside the window, he casually lifted it from its resting place, blinked at its gold metal edging and opened it.

He counted over the small roll of bills he found there, refolded them and thrust them down in his trousers pocket.

Then he took up her driver's license and frowningly studied it.

"Is your name Marjorie Ericsen?" he asked, his eyes still on the slip of cardboard.

"Yes," she replied.

"Are you married?" was his next question.

"Yes," she acknowledged, after a ponderable lapse of time. She resented the insolence of those questions. But it was best, she remembered, to answer them.

"Does your husband know where you are?"

"He will certainly make a determined effort to find

out," she said with more spirit than she had intended.

"And what would he be likely to do?" continued her captor.

"He would kill you for this," she averred.

"Not if I see him first," was her companion's unperturbed retort. "And I may as well tell you right now that we're goin' to do considerable travelin' before you get back to the home circle. We're goin' to head south, across three states, before we part company."

Her eyes narrowed ruminatively as the full meaning of that statement seeped into her consciousness.

"But I have one or two rather important engagements this afternoon," protested with a hauteur that was quite lost on him.

"Well, this is goin' to come before your pink teas," he retorted. "Drive faster."

She drove faster. But behind her mask of half-sullen indifferency, all the while, her spirit was crouched, catlike and ominously alert.

Her moment would come, she kept telling herself, and when it came she wanted to be ready for it.

If she could turn to the left during the next few minutes she could quarter back toward the Martenburg Highway, and that highway would eventually bring her in touch with a traffic officer or a state trooper.

It would bring her to Martenburg itself, where she was well enough known at the Downey garage and where she could swing in and stop in the midst of half a dozen stalwart workers before he could stop her.

He might kill her, of course, but it would be no easy thing to get away.

He would need to be an expert driver in order to back a car hurriedly out of that tangle of wheels and fenders.

But could he drive at all? Marjorie suddenly

asked herself.

How far after all, did this fugitive understand a car? For if he knew how to drive and control one why was he carrying her along on his flight? If he had no need for her there behind the wheel he would surely have knocked her senseless or left her at the roadside when he first saw her.

If he could travel free and untrammeled, he would surely have got rid of her.

Instead of striking her in the face, he might have killed her and tossed her into a ditch.

For she knew that she was of small importance in his scheme of things.

As a woman, as a thinking and feeling and breathing human being, she stood as trival as one of the road stones over which their tires were pounding.

But he would find out in the end—he would find out that he couldn't humiliate and degrade and ridicule her without paying for it.

"I want to tell you something while you've still got a chance of thinkin' it over," he was saying to her. "When we get off this back road we're goin' to meet people. We're goin' through towns and we're goin' to pass traffic cops, and I'm not goin' to stand for any monkey work. You understand?

"I'll be sittin' right here beside you, and at the first sign you're tryin' to put anything over you'll be drilled. I'll have this gun against your ribs, and I'll give you a bullet plumb through the stomach before I'll see you pull a squeal. D'you understand that?"

"I understand," she quietly acknowledged. "But there's one thing I'd like to——"

"If we're stopped and questioned," he interrupted, "you're motorin' down to open up your Pinehurst cottage for the fall season and I'm your handy man goin' along

to do the general fixin' up and maybe a bit of carpenter work. I'll be watchin' you, remember, and one pull of a finger'll bump you off."

She made no answer to that ultimatum. Her face was like a shop front with its shutters on.

But her narrowed eyes all the while were pioneering along the twining road in front of them, looking for some loophole in his circle of security.

The man sitting beside her seemed to resent her silence.

"You haven't been bossed much, have you?" he asked with his one-sided sneer.

"I suppose I haven't," she acknowledged, doing her best to keep her blind hatred of him under cover.

"And it makes you sulky, don't it, when you strike somebody who talks turkey to you?" he suggested with the careless malice that could be so maddening to her.

But she dare not indulge the luxury, she remembered, of parading her feelings before him.

"I've done what you asked me to do," she reminded him, her voice low with studied meekness.

"You bet you have!" averred her persecutor. "And you'll keep on doin' what I ask."

He was obviously intent on depriving her of her last tatter of dignity, and her smile was an embittered one.

"I don't size up very big in your day's program," she suggested, finding it hard to swallow her pill of humility.

"I've bigger troubles than you," he curtly informed her, and that prompted her to fret once more about her pit of helplessness.

"Why couldn't you take this car of mine," she said out of the prolonging silence, "and go where you please without trouble or danger?"

A barricaded look came into his face.

"I prefer havin' you along with me," he retorted.

"But I'm only an encumbrance," she persisted. That look of guile in his eyes, however, had not escaped her, and it brought confirmation of the suspicion already rooted deep in her mind.

This man, after all, was unable to drive a car.

He was, naturally, unwilling to admit it, but he was helpless without her at his side, and that was something worth remembering.

"That's better 'n bein' a corpse, ain't it?" her enemy was casually inquiring of her.

"There's something to be said on either side," she countered with an answering casualness.

For she had already touched bottom, she felt, and there were no further depths of terror into which he could thrust her.

But that show of fortitude in desperation began to disturb him.

"Say, you've begun to get an idea about how far I'd go, haven't you?" he challenged with a sudden fresh access of ferocity.

She knew well enough what he meant, but she deliberately chose to misread his words.

"You'll go until you get hungry, I suppose," she said with coerced calmness. She was even able to turn and stare into his lupine face. "You're hungry now, aren't you?"

"Why should I be?" he snapped, still wolflike.

"Because you look hungry," was her even-noted reply.

"Well, I'll attend to that a little quicker 'n you expect," he retorted as they mounted another hill slope.

From the crest of that slope they could see a frame farmhouse backed by a row of blighted apple trees

and flanked by a tumble-down barn.

The sun flashed on a row of milk pans airing on a root-house roof.

"We'll go in there," proclaimed the escaped convict. "We've lost our way, remember, so you tell the woman of the house you want to buy two dollars' worth of grub.

"Get bread and cold meat and some milk. If you can't get that get the best you can. You'll be needin' it before I'm through with you."

Her spirits rose as he spoke, for if there was a gate to be opened it would have to be opened by her captor.

And there was a chance as he swung that gate that she might step on the gas, swerve recklessly back to the road and go speeding over the hills before he could recover himself.

Or there was a further chance, if he once stood between her and the closed gate, that she could suddenly throw on her power and send the car catapulting forward.

That would pin his body between the driving steel and the rending timber.

Or, better still, it might run him down and snap a bone or two of that malignantly alert body, might even crush him, as her husband's tires had once crushed a copper head snake on a mountain road.

Or that squalid-looking house might hold more than they imagined.

There might be men there, full-blooded and big-framed men who handled axes and squirrel guns and would laugh at the threats of a white-faced refugee.

Men a little uncouth, but quick enough to take the part of a woman in distress; men who would meet this tyrant of the moment on his own ground and teach him

that law and life were something to be respected.

But her heart sank the next moment, for as they drew closer to the drab-walled house she saw merely an untidy break in the fence where a gate ought to be.

She slowed up meditatively, as her companion signaled her to turn into the rutted lane.

"Swing around and face the road again," he commanded, "and leave your engine runnin' when you get out."

As she circled about and backed and moved forward again, his quick-shifting glance seemed directed in turn to every quarter of the compass.

Yet when, after the car came to a stop, she raced the engine with altogether unnecessary noise, he looked at her with a suddenly hardening eye.

"You're flirtin' with a tombstone when you try tricks like that," he warned her.

"What did I do?" she asked, as she set her hand brakes and proceeded to pull off her gloves.

He did not answer her, for the house door had swung open and a full-bodied but slatternly-looking woman stood regarding them over its threshold.

So intently did Marjorie study this woman that she was scarcely conscious of her captor's movement as he thrust a one pound bill into her hand.

"Give her that for the grub," he said out of one corner of his mouth. "And if you spill the beans, remember, you get a bullet in the back."

A wave of disappointment swept through her as she stepped down from the car, for she saw that her enemy intended to follow her.

She tried not to think of him as she moved slowly toward the open door from which the startled housewife was staring at visitors so unexpected.

But the woman from the car knew that her enemy

was close behind her, and she knew that the right hand thrust so carelessly down into his coat pocket was clasped about the stock of a revolver.

So, all things considered, she decided it was best to stop outside the door and not try to push on into the house, as she had first intended.

But once she had stopped, she let her tragically intent gaze rest on the face of the young and slightly bovine woman confronting her.

She hoped for a moment that those none-too-alert eyes would read the silent message which she could not speak aloud.

But a movement from the man behind her forced her to end the prolonging silence.

"I'm afraid we've lost our way on the country roads," she found herself saying, "and I was wondering if I could possibly buy a little food from you—a little bread and meat and milk to eat as we go along."

Marjorie Ericsen, as the farm woman's gaze wavered between the two oddly contradictory figures, glanced down at the bill in her hand.

As she did so she saw first her wedding ring and then the ring beside it, the emerald-and-diamond ring that her friends, so often and so openly admired.

"We've no meat in the house," said the slatternly housewife, with what seemed a flush of shame, "unless you can wait until I kill a chicken."

"Could we wait?" asked the woman with the bill in her hand, turning to the man behind her; and she had the satisfaction of seeing a betraying flash of anger from his face as he shook his head.

"I could spare you a loaf of bread and a sealer of milk," conceded the dull-witted woman in the doorway.

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